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ABSTRACT

This digest defines interdisciplinary courses, presents the benefits and challenges of offering them in the community college, and describes six existing interdisciplinary courses at community colleges around the country. Interdisciplinary courses are characterized by the following: they tend to be highly innovative; they incorporate concepts and methods from more than one discipline; they explore broad-based social issues that require multiple perspectives; and they may combine liberal arts and general education with vocational education. Benefits accrue to students who take interdisciplinary courses, including preparation for a changing work environment; exposure to moral, humanistic, and political perspectives in vocational courses; and an increased sense of community on campus. However, faculty may resent the loss of autonomy that team teaching necessitates, and may become impatient with the amount of time needed for class preparation. The digest outlines six programs currently offered by community colleges. Cuyahoga Community College in Ohio, for example, offers a freshman-level course in classical philosophy and American literature. One professor introduces a topic, while the second professor acts as commentator, questioner, and devil's advocate. At Macomb County Community College in Michigan, a business and technical writing course was developed jointly by faculty from the English, Technology, and Accounting disciplines. Contains 12 references. (CAK)

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ERIC Clearinghouse for Community Colleges

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Digest

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Interdisciplinary Courses and Curricula in the Community Colleges

by Arianne Abell

Most general education programs in community colleges and four-year institutions use the distribution approach, in which students are permitted to choose courses from a list of applicable offerings in specified categories to fulfill the requirements (Astin, 1993; Cohen & Brawer, 1996; Smith, 1993). While this approach introduces students to many different disciplines and ways of thinking, it leaves a lot to chance. Students often do not take courses in a coherent fashion and, without specific guidance from faculty, they rarely see the connections among courses (Boyer, 1987; Gaff, 1995; Smith, 1993). Faculty and administrators in institutions of higher education can make the coherence in general education programs more obvious by integrating knowledge and creating a perspective that is more genuine (Boyer, 1987; Smith, 1993). One way to do this is to create interdisciplinary courses and curricula for our undergraduates. This Digest explores interdisciplinary courses as an effective means of generally educating students in community colleges across the nation.

What are Interdisciplinary Courses?

An interdisciplinary course is often defined as a course with at least two instructors from different departments, divisions, or specializations, in which ideas and perspectives are synthesized (Davis, 1995; Hepner, 1995). Interdisciplinary courses are often characterized by:

- Being highly innovative (Davis, 1995; Hepner, 1995);
- Incorporating new concepts and methods between disciplines (Clark & Wawrytko, 1990; Davis, 1995);
- Exploring content that involves broad-based social issues requiring multiple disciplines for effective study (Davis, 1995; Garbowsky, 1995);
- Educating students in ways that are not bounded by artificial disciplinary lines that do not exist in the world outside higher education institutions (Jacobs & Teahen, 1996); and/or
- Combining liberal arts and general education with vocational education (Felton, 1996; Jacobs & Teahen, 1996).

How Do Interdisciplinary Courses Fit Into Community Colleges?

Community colleges' institutional missions emphasize serving the community through addressing the needs of a variety of students, including those who drop in for a course or two, attend for vocational education, and enroll for transfer purposes. Interdisciplinary courses will broaden the educational experience for those students who do not plan to continue with further formal education after their community college experience (Garbowsky, 1995). By requiring them to think about issues from multiple points of view, interdisciplinary courses prepare students in vocational programs for a changing work environment (Jacobs & Teahen, 1996).

No matter why a student initially attends a community college, integrated courses help to create a sense of community on campus. Interdepartmental faculty teams model an environment of intellectual collaboration. This in turn motivates students in both academic and developmental courses, and may encourage them to continue their education (Felton, 1996; Jacobs & Teahen, 1996).

Benefits and Challenges

In those courses that combine liberal and general education curricula with vocational curricula there is an increased mastery of the competencies that are required for both educational and vocational success (Jacobs & Teahen, 1996). Additionally, there is an incorporation of moral, humanistic, and political perspectives into courses that are taken by vocational students (Jacobs & Teahen, 1996). In general, interdisciplinary courses re-energize the faculty involved (Felton, 1996; Jacobs & Teahen, 1996), and allow the instructor to serve as a role model for life-long learning (Felton, 1996). Finally, interdisciplinary courses also contribute to "intellectual and spiritual [developments] of the whole person" (Davis, 1995).

However, faculty may become impatient with the amount of time they must give to interdisciplinary courses. Since these courses are team-taught, faculty autonomy is lost. This occurs not only in regard to the course content, but also the creation of assignments and grading policies and practices. Shifting from an autonomous to a collaborative approach to teaching can often be a source of frustration for faculty (Davis, 1995). For students, the challenge lies in the potential difficulty they may experience in transferring to a four-year institution. Since these courses are not yet commonplace throughout the higher education curriculum, not all interdisciplinary courses will easily transfer to other institutions (Jacobs & Teahen, 1996).

Existing Interdisciplinary Programs

Six examples of general education programs that take an interdisciplinary approach illustrate the objectives and the importance of these courses in community colleges.

Shoreline Community College (Washington). Part of their core curriculum includes integrated studies courses. An example of this is the Science, Civilization, and Human Creativity course. The courses become classified as "integrated studies" by demonstrating the integration of knowledge and skills from multiple disciplines, usage of different methodologies, and breadth rather than depth of knowledge (Rosenwasser, 1995).

Cuyahoga Community College (Ohio). One choice students have at this community college is a three-quarter, freshman-level course in classical philosophy and American literature. The two professors who teach the course have different areas of interest within philosophy and this stimulates discussion. One professor introduces a topic and presents ideas while the second professor acts as a commentator, questioner, and even as devil's advocate. This particular course has been offered successfully for 15 years (Davis, 1995).

Niagara County Community College (New York). This institution also offers interdisciplinary courses. One example is a course, taught by two faculty, that explores the visual, verbal, and performing arts. The two faculty members relate one art form to another (Davis, 1995).

Chemeketa Community College (Oregon). As part of a faculty development program, faculty are encouraged to propose interdisciplinary courses. Many of their courses connect general education with technical and professional disciplines. For example, as part of the Writing Across the Curriculum project, the nursing faculty integrated technical writing and applied nursing content by emphasizing critical thinking and writing and oral communication skills (Felton, 1996).

Macomb County Community College (Michigan). This college also incorporates general education curricula with occupational curricula. One such course is a business and technical writing course designed by faculty from English, technology, and accounting disciplines. Other combinations include the following: nursing, health care ethics, and English; physics and English; and math, English, engineering, visual communications/ commercial art, industry training, and business (Felton, 1996).

Lansing Community College (Michigan). At Lansing, 14 faculty members come together in four teams that boast the incorporation of as many disciplines and teaching techniques as possible. The following disciplines are represented: chemistry, physics, biology, geology, meteorology, and system dynamics. The courses are organized around four basic questions that cause students to incorporate ideas from multiple disciplines when approaching an assignment (Davis, 1995).

Conclusion

While interdisciplinary courses account for only a small number of courses at community colleges, they provide benefits to both faculty and students. Some institutions shy away from these types of courses because changing to a cooperative approach to instruction is time-consuming for faculty. Also, the courses may not readily transfer to four-year institutions. Yet, as faculty and administrators look toward improving general education nationally, interdisciplinary courses appeal to reformers who seek to improve coherence in the curriculum at both community colleges and four-year institutions

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